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ABSTRACT

Conflict involved in school restructuring is natural and can be beneficial. This paper presents findings of a study that examined conflict between "insiders" and "insider out-groups" within a high school in northeastern Washington State. The high school, located in an urban, low-to-middle income, working-class neighborhood, served a high-risk student population. Sixty percent of the students qualified for the free- or reduced-lunch program; 22 percent of the students were ethnic minorities. Data were derived from observations and interviews with 5 foreign language teachers and 2 English-Second-Language (ESL) teachers. The faculty members reported the following conflicts: uncertainty about the effect of restructuring on the philosophy and content of each department's programs; fear of unemployment; resentment about faculty division of responsibility; and conflict between the in-group (vocational education faculty) and the out-group (ESL and foreign language faculty). Despite their dissension, faculty viewed restructuring as necessary. An implication is that the perception of belonging to an "out-group" may prevent some teachers from participating in school change. (LMI)

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Conflicts in School Restructuring: A Case Study of Timberline High School

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Conflicts in School Restructuring: A Case Study of Timberline High School

BACKGROUND

Change is necessary to evolution; evolution is necessary to survival. Just as this rule applies to nature, so it also applies to human endeavors. However, change also implies a deviance from the norm, and to humans, this often translates to a certain amount of discomfort or conflict. When the system changes, the rules change, and the demands of the system for certain commodities change as well. In some cases, this change can even pose a real threat to the humans involved. For example, these threats might be loss of job because the new system does not have a place for the individual or because a change in the individual's job description would require learning and/or teaching new material or because the individual might be forced to adopt new methods or materials that conflict with personal beliefs or attitudes about education.

There are two general observations that can be made about conflict in a restructuring process. The first observation is that conflict is natural and to be expected in any restructuring effort. Little (1993) felt that "conflict increases as the changing school culture begins to shift from superficial conversations to serious discourse about learning, teaching styles, modes of organizing the curriculum, and so on." Lieberman (1995) amplified on this idea when she observed that "this [conflict] is to be expected; reforms ... touch deeply on people's values and world views about knowledge, the purpose of

schools, and the roles of teacher and student -- all very contentious issues in American society. It is not so much a question of whether conflict will arise, but how this conflict is handled. The second observation is that conflict in a restructuring process can ultimately be beneficial. Lieberman stated that "when viewed as a productive conflict -- a natural and inevitable part of the change process -- teachers learn that it is all right to hold differing views and argue for them, that it is a part of working toward building a norm of inquiry in the school, so that ideas about improving teaching and learning become the basis of on-going discussion."

In the realm of education, the most significant change is the restructuring of a system. There are numerous examples of recent studies on school restructuring, and each has a section on the problems that its effort has encountered. These conflicts can be generalized into twelve areas, as follows:

1. Conflicts in personal human relationships between the participants (Lieberman 7, Bondy 47). These might be personality conflicts, jealousies over abilities, or even conflicts between participants and families over the amount of time that a project is taking away from the home life.

2. Conflicts in professional relationships between the participants (Whitford 35-6). This conflict might include such things as a turf war over what programs do what or an ego battle over which participant should do a particular job or even a power struggle over who is most or best qualified to lead.

3. Conflicts in time between teaching and participation in the restructuring process. (Whitford and Gans 33-4) and (Goldsberry 150-1). This is usually an internal conflict for the teachers. They feel guilty if they are not working on the restructuring, and they feel guilty that they are not devoting their full attention and energy to delivering a quality education to their students. This is especially true if the school restructuring process involved site visits and inservice training that take teachers away from their classrooms.

4. Conflicts between "insiders" (those who are working on or working within the restructuring process) and "outsiders" (those who are professional educators as well but come to visit from other areas -- this does not include consultants who are technically outsiders but are actually intimately involved in the restructuring). This conflict is typified by the outsiders not fully understanding the needs of the system or the methods of the insiders. They may make observations, suggestions, or even changes that create disagreements or anxiety within the insiders.

5. Conflicts between participants' goals or ideas and existing laws, policies, procedures, or regulations. (Darling-Hammond 158-61) In many cases, the administration is the focal point for this conflict at the site of the restructuring; however, the actual conflict is usually with some larger body such as state legislatures or federal agencies.

6. Conflicts between administrators and participants in the change process (Goldsberry 145, Smylie and Tuermer 93, Ross and

Webb 71). These conflicts differ from those in number 5 above in that they are inherent in the system and not caused by outside individuals or organizations. One of the most notable among these was a complaint that administrators were trying to politicize the process. Another complaint was that administrators were trying to take over the process, either overtly or covertly.

7. Conflicts of confusion between participants who are at different stages of the change process at a given moment in time (Goldsberry et al 143). This is the old "let's all get on the same page" problem that most committees have experienced at one time or another. It involves the human dynamics of each individual's learning curve and each individual's participation and each individual's personal philosophy about education.

8. Conflicts within the system between those who advocate a change and those who feel the status quo is working and acceptable (Bondy 57). The heritage of classical rhetoric employed first by the Greeks and Romans over 2000 years ago always made the existence of a problem the first inquiry. In other words, "is there a problem?" is a natural question for many to answer. Besides, change within the system generally requires that the individual will have to change as well. Often the direction and the end result are in question.

9. Conflicts that might be a natural product of the particular approach employed in the restructuring process. Shared decision making (SDM) is one example of this kind of conflict. This might

be the conflict that arises as a part of reaching a consensus or a synthesis among the participants. Or as Bondy (47) observed, this might be from perceptions that SDM meant that every participant would be an active part of every decision. She quotes one participant at Frederick's Middle School, "now that we have SDM, there's more bitching than ever!"

10. Conflicts within the system caused by rumors (Goldsberry 145). Rumors about what changes the system might be making were the cause of secondary conflicts, such as several of those already listed.

11. Conflicts between the new system's unusual nature or requirements and the new faculty assigned to work within it (Goldsberry 145). One source of new faculty is the changes in the system's needs brought on by restructuring. Another source is the natural cycle of employment characterized on by retirements, relocations, and reemployment. These are not directly connected to the restructuring process, but the new faculty can fall victim to it.

12. Conflicts between "insiders" and "insider out-groups." Goldsberry et al (145) report that this was one unexpected source of conflict in their study of the New Suncook school restructuring. In that instance, the teachers involved in the process were surprised that they were in conflict with special education teachers in the district. Those special education teachers were opposed to the mainstreaming of special education students into a less structured program at New Suncook.

The topic of discussion for this paper will be this last type of conflict within the restructuring process. The case study will be Timberline High School in northeastern Washington State. In the end, the writers hope to develop some advice for future planners and/or participants of restructuring innovations.

BACKGROUND ON TIMBERLINE HIGH SCHOOL

Timberline High School (Timberline from here on) is located in northeastern part of Washington State, in an urban, low- to middle-income working class neighborhood. The high school has about 90 faculty, and the faculty's average age is 40 years old. The school serves 1,553 students, 60 percent of whom are on a free or reduced lunch program and 22 percent of whom are ethnic minorities. Timberline has the largest Native American and special education populations of any area school. It also draws students from a highly transient population; during 1993-94 academic school year, for example, more than 500 students did not stay for the full academic year. A December 1994 survey of teachers at Timberline revealed that approximately 341 Timberline students are significantly "at risk," and Timberline has a 10 to 20 percent drop-out rate. Furthermore, 80 to 90 percent of the graduating student population at Timberline will not go on to a college/university after receiving their high school diplomas. They will either go into low-skilled service work sectors, vocational schools, or migrate out to other areas.

To develop new programs that encourage students to remain in

school and to develop programs that have value to the student in future employment, Timberline faculty, staff, students, parents, and community members, with the assistance of a facilitator from the College of Education at a nearby state university, are involved in an extensive restructuring effort that began in 1992. Key elements of the restructuring process are the following: integrated, service-oriented curricula; applied learning; and site-based management. Timberline currently has a "Core Team" of 90 freshmen students (drawn from a three-period block of English, social studies, and science courses) who will participate in the proposed service-learning project.

ESL AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS AS OUT-GROUPS

Federal Public Law 94-142 provides all children free and appropriate education. Children of immigrants who are non- or limited English proficient are provided with English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in our public school system. Because ESL classes are added on as the need arises, only a few school districts have full-time teachers just to teach these ESL classes. At one small school district in the State of Washington, there is one ESL teacher at a 0.8 Full Time Equivalency (FTE) who teaches at three different school sites in the district. She travels between classes from the high school in the first period to the middle school for two periods, and then to the elementary school for one period. She is called a "tennis shoes teacher" because of the way she literally runs

between schools in this district everyday of the school year.

ESL classes and the teachers who teach these classes are often perceived as out-groups to the schools. Even though the ESL provision is a state-mandated program, it is never a part of regular school curricula. One ESL teacher commented that she feels like a visitor to each of the schools, and she never feels "at home" in any of the schools. She also said that she and her students were moved from one classroom to another in a high school a total of six times during a school year because each room was needed by one department or the other. She feels she and her students are never quite welcomed as "regular teacher" and "regular students." This creates the climate for the insiders and the insider out-groups.

One reason for ESL classes being viewed as "temporary" is in the fluctuation of student numbers. Oftentimes, ESL students who come to public schools are children of seasonal immigrants, and naturally, they move around quite a bit. Those who are in school in the beginning of a school year have no guarantee that they would still be there at the end of that semester, let alone at the end of the school year.

Foreign language programs and the teachers who teach them are in an out-group category like ESL when compared to other "core" subjects and their teachers. One vice principal at a Washington State high school commented, "Foreign languages aren't even a part of [the state's] high school graduation requirement, so why do we even have them?"

THE ESL/FOREIGN LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT AT TIMBERLINE

Timberline's ESL program is quite large compared to many Eastern Washington high schools. In the winter of 1995, the program had 99 students whose first language was not English, and it was supported by two full-time faculty and a 0.4 FTE part-time teacher. Those 99 students were children of recent immigrants representing countries such as Vietnam, Korea, El Salvador, Russia, Ukraine, Estonia, Laos, and Mexico. Many of the parents were transient workers, and the fact that students were attending school one day did not necessarily mean they would still be enrolled at the school the next day. There were 73 ESL students at the beginning of the 1994 academic school year, and a third of these were no longer attending Timberline by the winter of 1995. With new students coming in constantly, class sizes and demographics are always changing. Therefore, the program is hard to keep constant. This situation creates the environment for the "threat to future employment" conflict among this group of teachers.

The average ESL student at Timberline will attend all day (six periods) ESL classes for two years before he/she can go into regular English speaking classes. ESL teachers at Timberline are very enthusiastic about their students and often go beyond what their job specifications requires. They are not only classroom teachers; they are also counselors, mentors, and friends to those students. One teacher mentioned that even after students are main-streamed, they visit the ESL classroom often, not only for

help with their English, but to stop by just to talk to an old teacher -- or just to see familiar faces. Clearly, there is a personal and family-like sense to the environment in the ESL program.

SCHOOL RESTRUCTURING AT TIMBERLINE

The restructuring effort at Timberline High began from within the faculty members. In 1992, the faculty saw that only approximately 15 percent of the Timberline graduates went on to colleges or universities, This meant that over 80 percent of graduating students needed to be trained to be ready for work in society after their graduation, and the Timberline faculty decided that they needed to meet the needs of these students. "I think we prepare the students who are college bound," one teacher said in reference to the 15 percent, "but I don't think that we prepare the student who is not college bound to leave the high school and be able to go out and find gainful employment."

The faculty decided that the students need social skills, so that they can integrate into the world of work after high school. Cooperative learning, student-centered learning, and more active teaching were approaches mentioned by all of the teachers that would help this 85 percent make a successful transition into employment.

In the spring of 1994, a faculty survey was taken concerning restructuring activities. Surprisingly, 97 percent of the entire faculty voted to be "willing to be active participant in

the Timberline High restructuring effort;" 95 percent voted that they would be "willing to change their teaching situation (how, what and with whom they teach) if it meant better preparation of their students for post-secondary work or educational pursuit." One hundred percent of the faculty voted that they would be "willing to work collaboratively with other faculty on integrated curriculum or cross-curricular activities." Timberline is still struggling through the changes; one faculty described the process as "almost like we are trying to repair 747 jet while it's still flying."

The restructuring process began. Financial support came from the 1209 grant, or Student Learning Improvement Grant (SLIG), and in order to help facilitate the process, the faculty established a partnership with two professors from Education Department at an eastern Washington state university.

Fundamental and substantive work towards the restructuring began with the faculty decision to model their restructuring after the model described by Carl D. Glickman (1993). The first step was to establish a covenant, defining their vision of what learning and teaching means at Timberline. Discussion began in the fall of 1994 with faculty, parents, and students all giving input, and the process concluded on March 31, 1995, when the seven page covenant was ratified by a majority vote of the faculty.

Consistent with the policy of Glickman, the faculty then began work on developing a school charter. This document details

the membership, decision-making process (in this case SDM), and duties of the 19 member Site-Base council which will largely chart the course for much of the restructuring at Timberline. This document was written, voted on by the faculty, and finally ratified by majority vote in April, 1995.

The next task was the reorganization of all courses into five career/academic pathways leading into any one of three post-graduation opportunities. Within each pathway there are three different levels of achievement. First, representing about 15 percent of the students is the pathway leading to community college or university work. Next, there is approximately 70 percent of the students who will enter advanced technical training, i.e. vocational school, and finally, the remaining 15 percent who will enter skilled employment or the military.

Feeding these five pathways -- business and marketing, communication and arts, science and natural resources, health and human services, and industry and technology -- is the Goals Orientation Leadership Decisions program (GOLD). Developed for ninth graders, this program's main function is to orient students to high school life and on to the career/academic pathways. However, it also helps them to develop career interests and to set a career goal, develop computer literacy, and an understanding of cultural competence.

RESTRUCTURING CONFLICT IN THE ESL/FOREIGN LANGUAGE FACULTY

This analysis synthesizes seven interviews of the five faculty members from the foreign language department and two faculty members from the ESL program and 20 hours of observations at Timberline over a three month period. Notes and transcripts from interviews and observations were collected and coded by both researchers after interviewing and observations were completed.

The first conflict was one of emotion over the uncertainty of what restructuring at Timberline might ultimately mean to the content and philosophies of either or both programs. The process of change has ignited several confusing emotions in the foreign language/ESL faculty. Anxiety, fear, excitement, and anger are just a few that the teachers mentioned when asked how the restructuring process had affected them. Most were willing to talk about the feelings they had experienced, but few were able to describe their feelings clearly.

The solution to the conflict arising from these emotions is not easily obtained. The teachers wanted to write their own plan, and at the same time, they wanted to know what it would look like before it was finished. Teachers mixed their descriptions of their feelings: speaking about one emotion for a bit, losing the thought, and then switching to the next. "I'm excited but exhausted. We don't have a model of what it will look like yet, so I feel anxious too. Also I feel empowered by the input," commented one teacher.

A second common source of conflict is the fear that the

restructuring has the potential of leaving the participant unemployed. In the case of Timberline, one teacher realized that with only 15 percent of the students going to college after graduation, it would be unlikely that they will be scheduled into foreign language classes. "Ultimately," the teacher says, "I may be restructured right out of a job."

One possible solution to this conflict might be found in creating a pathway that leads to foreign language and is not limited to the 15 percent who plan to attend college. According to this teacher, those students who will probably not be attending college should still be advised to take foreign language as well . Until then, according to this teacher, supporting the restructuring "would be like leading the lemmings off a cliff and hurrying my demise."

While, because of the federal mandate, the ESL program did not experience this particular threat to its survival, it still has to contend with the problem of fluctuating enrollments. However, a goal shift of the restructuring was to the concept of applied learning, which has helped the ESL program to a degree. The ESL instructors' first priority is to give their students enough language skills to integrate into the American culture. ESL courses teach social survival skills which are consistent with the concept of applied learning, i.e. banking, going to the grocery store, and going to the post office.

A third source of conflict at Timberline was between the faculty over who was doing what in the process. One faculty was

given release time equivalent to 0.5 FTE to work on the restructuring to act as a committee chair. He complained about resentment from most of the other faculty members. He expressed the desire to resign as the chairperson at the end of the current school year.

Finally, there is the conflict between the in-group and the out-group. In this case, the out-group is the ESL/Foreign Language faculty. Their complaint was that they were not leaders in the restructuring process. One foreign language teacher stated that the leaders of the restructuring effort were the vocational people, and conflict often erupted with them over the direction the restructuring efforts would take. The vocational people favored a move to an applied learning curriculum, and they sought to move the restructuring efforts in that direction. For the most part, applied learning was simply not consistent with the foreign language teaching at Timberline. The vocational people claimed that the Timberline foreign language students did not gain enough proficiency to be sent out to jobs and use their foreign language skills.

CONCLUSION

While the restructuring process is still underway at Timberline, there are two observations that are a result of this study which apply to that school specifically, but they may apply to any other school going through a restructuring process:

The first observation is that restructuring is often

necessary, and when it is, the outcome is generally beneficial if the goals were realistic and the participants arrived at the decision through consensus. Despite the mixed feelings and the differing definitions the Timberline faculty seems to have about the restructuring, they all support it. When pressed, even one strong dissenter admitted it is necessary. He switched his position for just that one question. When asked to describe the personality characteristics of someone who supports the restructuring, most Timberline teachers used words such as "cooperative" and "open-minded." This observation becomes useful to those involved in a restructuring process when they realize that they must always look at the ultimate good effects of the process. Often they become mired down in the moment and lose sight of the greater good.

The second observation is that some of the restructuring conflicts may only be in the perceptions of the participants. One such case was an ESL teacher who decided to actively participate as a member of one of the restructuring committees. That teacher decided that even though the ESL program and the students really don't fit into any of the school restructuring process, he is very optimistic, and he is all in favor of the restructuring because he knows the restructuring will be good for <u>all</u> students, and even though it does not affect ESL students initially, it will affect future ESL students when they are mainstreamed into regular classes. He stated that he had no feelings of resentment toward the restructuring. After he had become

involved, he began to realize that his feelings of being in an out-group were largely mistaken perceptions. His feelings had changed enough that he was able to state, "All of it has been one long informative situation for me. I don't really feel left out as an individual. I have the opportunity to consult with my colleagues, and I was able to express my opinion." This difference between the perception of belonging to an out-group and the reality of the school might be all that keeps some people from participating. This observation can help those involved in a restructuring process by showing the importance of making an effort to bring in everyone in the system. This effort may at times be difficult, and it may take more than one attempt, but it will remove a cloud of doubt that might arise in an independent outside observer's mind, and it will benefit the restructuring by making sure that the process was fair, democratic, and complete.

Hopefully, both of these observations, along with the list of potential conflicts at the beginning of this study, will be able to prepare school systems for some of the problems that they might encounter as a part of a restructuring process. However, it must be remembered that the most important ingredient in school restructuring is the positive attitudes of teachers. The attitude that expresses the need for the restructuring process, and being cooperative toward the process is good for the whole school. In the end, the success of restructuring effort will benefit the ESL/Foreign Language programs at Timberline and its students. Faculty who are more than willing to help and

contribute to the process are essential in the process, no matter which department they belong to or what subject they teach.

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